

MAXINE MIMMS



LLyn De Danaan photo

“MY LIFE IS EDUCATION”

The anticipation is palpable as the crowd rises to catch a glimpse of her. The P.A. system throbs with booming beats to introduce the guest of honor at her 90th birthday party. Dr. Maxine Mimms descends the stairs, surrounded by an entourage, and advances regally with a sparkling cane. She wears a huge white-brimmed hat decorated with cowrie shells.* With a proud smile and grand wave, she meanders through the crowd, greeting old friends, touching children. Smartphones held high capture her charisma.

Widely known in African American circles, Maxine Buie Mimms is an educator and counselor who works with schools all over the United States—globally, too, including her friend Oprah Winfrey’s Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa. She is best known, however, for her work as founder of The Evergreen State College’s Tacoma campus. “Mimms is a feisty and outspoken academic whose unorthodox style has often ruffled feathers in the placid Pacific Northwest,” *Essence* magazine wrote in 1997. “Yet her provocative educational philosophy has also produced results.” When a visiting historian read her that line, she smiled and chuckled: “Put that in there. I would like that for my tombstone, too!”

In a cottage at water’s edge in rural Mason County, she often receives visitors. She is a teacher, a preacher and a healer. Her one-bedroom home serves as both classroom and sanctuary. It’s filled with African art, artifacts and photos. A slew of awards hide in the bathroom, perhaps so they won’t intimidate visitors. She may be flamboyant, but she is humble. Dr. Mimms has been on a mission to serve her whole life. She sees no reason why 90 should slow her down. “This phone rings 24/7,” says Isa Nichols, her confidant and dear friend. “She is solving the problems of the world sitting in that chair.”

* Cowrie shells were used as currency in the African slave trade.



Dr. Maxine Mimms celebrates her 90th birthday at The Evergreen State College Tacoma campus. *Lori Larson photo*

An hour east, you will find Mimms' legacy—or "longevity," as she puts it—in a far more urban environment. As you enter The Evergreen State College building in Tacoma's Hilltop neighborhood you are greeted by a bold, bright African mural. Just inside the door there's a framed portrait of Dr. Mimms, donning a mortarboard, as founder and former executive director of the Tacoma program. She calls her Ph.D. a "Ph.WE" because her career has been dedicated to helping under-served, marginalized populations rise through education.

The events of 1968, often characterized as "The year that changed the world," significantly impacted Mimms' outlook on her role as a leader. "The murdering of a Martin Luther King and the Kennedys was very painful. But you have to re-image, 'What does that mean in terms of you, Maxine?' " she says, framing the question rhetorically. "Well, I had to increase my studies. I had to look at theology. I had to absolutely say, 'What does liberation theology mean to me? What does it mean for me to have met Martin?' What privilege I had. I had to rise with confidence and do something about it. So in me, their farewells forced me to do a capital Hello. And in that, that's why you have the Tacoma campus."

MAXINE MIMMS joined the faculty of the fledgling Evergreen State College in Olympia in 1972. The innovative liberal arts school had opened the previous year, just four years after Governor Dan Evans and legislators signed off on legislation that recognized a need for a state college in the South Sound area. A huge cohort of Baby Boomers were departing high schools. Leaving tradition behind, Evergreen caused a stir by not giving traditional grades, gauging achievement instead with in-depth narrative evaluations. It prides itself on interdisciplinary courses that combine academic departments. Clearly, it was born out of the 1960s. The students it attracted proved it.



The Evergreen State College Tacoma campus on 6th Avenue in 2018. The mural was a student project, designed with symbols that represent the different ethnic communities that have lived in the Hilltop neighborhood.

Lori Larson photo

"When I got down here it blew me away it was so white," Mimms remembers. "I had just left Washington, D.C., and I almost had a heart attack. I couldn't believe I had participated in that much whiteness and that much clear blackness—and then come down here. They had green hair. They had on robes. They had dogs. I had never seen anything like that in my life. It's the best thing that ever happened to me because Evergreen helped me to grow up and mature and not be so judgmental. When you're confined you can be judgmental about stuff you don't even know about."

Mimms was commuting to the college's sprawling Cooper Point campus from Tacoma, which at the time had two respected private colleges but no public institutions with affordable tuition other than community colleges and trade schools.* "Every bone in me would resist," she remembers. "My soul was crying and sad because I was not able to work with people whose skin color looked like mine." There she was, a self-described "middle-class African American woman, Southern-bred," bringing her skills and body to "a European model" college. "I couldn't do it."

While eating at Browne's Star Grill on MLK Way in Tacoma, she overheard two women talking about "a horrible woman" who left to teach in Olympia when she should be teaching her own community. Mimms approached them. "They were two black women. One had a child with sickle cell anemia, and she was wondering how she would ever be able to go back to school with all the responsibilities she had. These women had been saying there was no one in Tacoma in the four-year education system who would help people like them."

She knew what she had to do.

Starting in 1972, Dr. Mimms and her neighbor, Dr. Betsy Diffendal, began teaching in their homes. Mimms would start her instruction in Tacoma at 5 a.m., leave for Evergreen at 8 and work in Olympia until 5. She kept up that schedule until 1984 when she started teaching full-time in Tacoma.

Mimms would instruct students any way she could, anywhere she could, with whatever resources were available. Students registered for school in Olympia but she held classes in Tacoma. "That's how I hid the students, because if I had gone and asked permission and worked with committees to start a campus it would have never happened. I'd still be meeting committees. They came to my house every day. They brought their husbands



Dr. Mimms in the 1970s. *The Evergreen State College (TESC)*

*The University of Washington's Tacoma campus did not open until 1990.

and their children, their books and supplies. We filled up every chair and sofa in the living room. Sometimes there were 15 around the dining room table.”

INSTRUCTION AT HOME was nothing new to Mimms. She had watched her mother, Isabelle, teach a neighbor how to read at their kitchen table in Newport News, Virginia. After church, they always had chicken, potato salad, string beans and visitors. “It was just a formal, wonderful conversation. My father insisted that we agree at the table on topics and all kinds of current events. After the dinner we were forced to disagree, but respect the disagreement. So therefore I can hear all kinds of opinions and I never take it personally,” Mimms says.

Born on March 4, 1928—or “March Forth,” as Mimms puts it with a wry smile—she was one of five children. Her parents, Benson and Isabella (DeBerry) Buie were descendants of African American farmers in the Carolinas. “The vocabulary in my house was ‘improvement.’ It was always improvement. Negro improvement,” says Mimms, explaining that her father was a “Garveyite,” a follower of Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican orator who promoted the back-to-Africa movement that led to Rastafarianism. Garvey was popular in the 1910-1920s with blacks around the world who envisioned displaced Africans coming together and forming their own country. Garvey taught “a separatist philosophy of social, political and economic freedom for blacks.” By 1920 Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association boasted 4 million members. Garvey once spoke to 25,000 people at



Saturday market on the streets of Newport News, Virginia in 1936. Paul Carter collection, Library of Congress

Madison Square Garden, preaching pride in African history and culture.*

Garvey's black-pride philosophy led Mimms' father to encourage his children to speed walk everywhere during the Great Depression. He told them it was for their health. In reality he refused to let them experience humiliation on segregated city buses. When they went to the opera, Maxine wondered out loud why all the performers were white. "My father told me that all the real performers came out late at night when it was past our bedtime, and we were all home in bed."

Benson Buie also taught his children "how to paint with language." Maxine learned to combat negativity by shifting "the image of that language that might have caused you an issue."

The family lived near Hampton University—an historically black private school—that drew many African American orators. Maxine listened to lectures by Howard Thurman, a theologian, author and civil rights activist who was a mentor to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Her parents' sense of racial pride and drive for self-improvement are the benchmarks of Mimms' long, eventful life. She doesn't focus on the difficulties in her lifetime. In fact she flat-out refuses to go there. "As a black woman born in the South, I reversed everything. I will not allow myself to spiral into negativity. I refuse to!"

You should always "be truthful," she counsels. "But if they murdered a Kennedy, a King and all, I had to see the murder as a season. Because you must remember that loss hits the heart. You've got to stay alive... Bobby Kennedy's humanity might have impacted me. My humanity may have impacted *him*. We all know each other. You can't withdraw. I don't believe in the concept of retreats. I don't like retreats. I like advances. I don't think anybody with any social justice consciousness needs to go on a retreat. Retreat to what? That's showing defeat in your spirit."



Marcus Garvey reads the Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World at Liberty Hall in New York City in August 1920. *UCLA African Studies Center*

* Garvey grew so popular that FBI Director Herbert Hoover, ever fearful of "subversives," targeted Garvey's Black Star Line shipping company to stop the spread of Garvey's philosophy. Hoover eventually succeeded, and Garvey was sent to prison on mail fraud charges in 1923 and deported to Jamaica in 1927. In a move that lost him support among African Americans, Garvey supported The Greater Liberia Act of 1939, which would have sent 12 million African Americans to Liberia. It was defeated in Congress.

THAT THE BUIE children would go to college was not in doubt. Mimms holds a bachelor's degree from Virginia Union University, a master's from Wayne State University in Detroit and a doctorate in educational administration from Union Graduate School. Mimms remembers her experience moving through the ranks of higher education in the era of segregation. Black educators spotted the brightest kids and gave them marching orders. Maxine remembers it all so vividly:

Back in those days ... I didn't know there was separation between high school and college. It was mandatory in our neighborhood to go to college. They just ran together. ... Black teachers would say, "We're going to need five doctors. Henry, you're a 4.0 student. Helen, you're going to go to..." They told me I was going to go into medicine—hematology.

I got to Virginia Union and I noticed that you couldn't do science and run and chase men. And that's what I had wanted. I had never seen that many men. I knew Sam (McKinney), I knew Martin (Luther King Jr.), Adam Clayton Powell. Sam and Martin were at Morehouse. And the Morehouse men used to come to debate the Virginia Union men. Lord have mercy!

I was taught how to get words to make an image. That's what the black schools were all about. And that's why you find successful preachers and successful doctors because [with] everything you did your vocabulary had to paint a picture for your community. So we were forced to become [healers].

You met your husband and your wife at college. Met a good girl; met a good man.

MAXINE MET Jack Mimms in Detroit. The two were married, and headed west in 1953 when Jack took a job with the Boeing Company in Seattle. They bought a home in Bellevue. The irony was that it had once belonged to a Japanese family sent off to an internment camp during World War II. Maxine worked as an elementary school teacher in Seattle and Kirkland, including Leschi—Jimi Hendrix's alma mater. Those schools were predominantly African American. Maxine was a working mom with three young children: Ted, Toni and Kenneth.

There was an incident when Ted, the eldest, was only 4. They were visiting a friend who had a young son of her own. When the two boys became suspiciously quiet, Maxine went to check on them. They had been pretending they were hiding from Santa Claus on Christmas Eve when they got locked in a chest. Maxine administered mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to Ted and slapped the other boy to revive him. The incident made the front

page of *The Seattle Daily Times*. In adulthood, Ted Mimms observed that he might have suffered brain damage from oxygen deprivation had his mother not been so decisive. Growing up, as he drifted off to sleep, she told him he was a brilliant boy who could do anything he set his mind to. "My mother sees the genius in everyone and it is this that we celebrate," he says.

IN 1968, Mimms was hired as the project director for a teacher in-service sensitivity training program for Seattle schools. The effort was financed by the Civil Rights Act. The headline in *The Seattle Times*—"4 Negroes Named As Administrators In Seattle Schools"—underscored the novelty of blacks in key supervisory roles. Mimms' position was created out of a turbulent time within the school district. Since the 1950s, civil rights leaders had tried to convince the Seattle School Board that the schools had



Official Seattle Public Schools portrait of Mimms. *Maxine Mimms collection*

to be integrated. Though segregation on the West Coast was not as obvious as in the Jim Crow South, Portland, Pasco and Seattle were sharply divided along racial lines. In Seattle, de facto housing segregation—"redlining"—resulted in neighborhood schools that were predominantly black. Most of Seattle's African American community was concentrated in the Central Area. Black parents and civil rights leaders set out to force integrated schools. First they had to convince the School Board and Seattle citizens that it was a problem, since there was a commonly held belief that children should attend schools in their own neighborhoods. At the time, Seattle had 13 "black" schools and more than a hundred "white" schools, according to a flyer disseminated by the NAACP, the Congress for Racial Equality and the Central Area Civil Rights Committee. Meantime, black students accounted for 9.1 percent of total enrollment in the Seattle School District. Here's how the numbers played out at the "black" schools:

Horace Mann Elementary, 95 percent; Leschi Elementary, 89 percent; Harrison Elementary, 83 percent; T.T. Minor Elementary, 80 percent; Madrona Elementary, 79 percent; Coleman Elementary, 76 percent; Stevens Elementary, 45 percent; Washington Junior High, 66 percent; Meany Junior High, 49 percent. At Garfield High School, black pupils made up half the student body. Moreover, 75 percent of all black high school students in the district attended Garfield.

The statistics buttressed a major problem for Seattle: the perpetuity of discrimi-

nation in society. Dr. Ronald J. Rousseve, an Associate Professor of Education at Seattle University, put it like this: "Stereotypes, racial epithets, unconscious prejudices, and both subtle and overt discrimination are still so pervasive in our society (and this includes the Pacific Northwest), that children from different social backgrounds cannot possibly learn to relate to one another as individuals if they are kept separated most of their childhood years."

Many ideas had been bounced around over the years. There was no easy solution because de facto segregation was so entrenched. Civil rights leaders mulled a school boycott. They knew it had to be well organized, and resolved to take a cue from boycotts staged by civil rights leaders in the South and form "freedom schools" so students would still receive instruction.

Many of Seattle's churches supported the boycott. But the city's influential afternoon daily, *The Seattle Times*, editorialized that "no major public agency in the state has shown more concern about racial problems than the Seattle Public Schools." The schools' "primary function is education, not social reform. They inherited—they did not create—racial imbalance in Seattle neighborhoods." Governor Dan Evans, a progressive Republican, was also wary of a boycott. "I'd much rather see the talents of civil rights leaders and of the community as a whole working out a solution, rather than protesting a problem," Evans said. Civil rights leaders countered that they had tried for more than a decade to work out a solution but they had gotten nowhere with the School Board.

Phillip Swain, the School Board president, explained a 1963 policy that the board "has a responsibility to promote racial understanding within its broad obligation to provide a high-quality education program for all pupils" while "reaffirming its faith in the concept of the neighborhood school." What that meant was the schools would likely remain segregated like the neighborhoods, but the School Board was willing to invest in quality teachers and programs for the predominately minority schools.

"Compensatory education does not compensate for the feelings of inferiority that negro children have," said Bernard Pearce, a Leschi Elementary School teacher and Central Area parent. "This does not mean that the teachers are inferior or that the curriculum is inferior, but the situation is inferior."

In 1964 a voluntary transfer program was instituted to help correct racial imbalance, but funding was always an issue. Civil rights leaders did not consider voluntary transfers to be a strong solution to de facto segregation.

The NAACP, the Congress for Racial Equality and the Central Area Civil Rights Committee vowed on February 23, 1966, to carry out a boycott, having "given up hope that any serious plan to integrate the schools would be considered." The groups stipulated that a boycott could be averted if Seattle Public Schools met two conditions:

Develop and publish a comprehensive plan to integrate the schools within a reasonable period of time...

Begin immediately a program of compulsory in-service training for all school personnel in human relations, with an emphasis on the understanding and acceptance of racial minorities in previously all-white schools.

That second stipulation brought Maxine Mimms into the picture in 1968 as director of in-service training for Seattle teachers. A year later as Black Student Unions lobbied for curriculum changes, Dr. Mimms declared, "The young black militants must wake up to the fact that what they need is not separate black history courses, but an American history course that recognizes the black. What we are doing is assuring separation, which is the new name for segregation."

A student at the time, Teresa Banks, wrote that she wanted integrated schools because "you have to grow up with other races to be able to work well with them. You can't just grow up with your own race and then go into a world that has mixed races and do good work."

Civil rights leaders claimed success as roughly 3,000 students participated in the two-day freedom schools all around the city, March 31-April 1, 1966. So many students

showed up that they had to find other spaces to open classrooms. African American students and parents reveled in having black history taught in the context of the United States.

The integration of Seattle Public Schools would take many forms in the years to come, including "magnet schools" and controversial mandatory busing in the 1970s. In light of recent statistics, you could argue that de facto segregation has crept back into Seattle's schools due to socio-economic factors. Gary Ikeda, general counsel for Seattle Public Schools, told *The*



—Times staff photo by Richard S. Heyns.
MRS. ROBERTA BYRD, CO-PRINCIPAL OF THE EAST MADISON Y. M. C. A. FREEDOM SCHOOL, LECTURED ON NEGRO HISTORY
More than 300 pupils registered for the two-day protest school at the Y. M. C. A.

Freedom Schools Have Varied Staffs

Seattle Times in 2008, “The challenge now is to foster diversity without mandating it.”

Seattle Schools now have a Department of Racial Equity Advancement, which “advances the cultural transformation of Seattle Public Schools—the changes in policy, people, and practice necessary to create a culturally responsive organization that ensures racial equity and the success of every student.”

Earlier this year, Dr. Mimms met the 35-year-old black woman charged with overseeing in-service training for Seattle teachers, her old job. She’s “gorgeous, pregnant, trying to teach white people, *again*, how to be courteous. There is so much rudeness. ... This is 50 years later and ... they just changed the name. Mine was civil rights, human relations.” The new person has a Ph.D. in trauma organization, Mimms notes, quipping, “Don’t ask me what that means.”

What it means is that a lot of things haven’t changed.

WE NEED TO REWIND: It was in 1969 that Arthur Fletcher, Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor, called Mimms to join him in Washington, D.C. A charismatic former college football star, Fletcher had been the Republican candidate for lieutenant governor of Washington in 1968. Narrowly defeated, he would have been the first African American statewide elected official in state history. President Nixon tasked the former Kansan with promoting Affirmative Action on federal contracts. Mimms went to work as special assistant to the director of the Labor Women’s Bureau. Its director, Elizabeth Duncan Koontz, was the first African American woman to head the bureau and the highest ranking woman in the Nixon Administration. In 1968 Koontz had made another first as an African American when she became president of the National Education Association. She established the Human and Civil Rights Division. Mimms remembers Duncan as “a powerful and creative woman.”

Asked if she ever got to meet the president, Mimms says, “Mmmhhh. And he was a crook. I learned a lot in the Nixon Administration about policies and colonization and this kind of thing. He was a genius at pulling people in, and he needed a lot of attention. Very insecure man.”

In the 1970s, the Women’s Bureau focused on “addressing and eliminating discrimination against women and minorities in the workforce.” The bureau also played a role in Title IX, the civil rights act that stipulated no one could be excluded because of gender in any federally funded educational program.



Llyn De Danaan photo

"Millions of women are holding a job and running a household," Dr. Mimms said in 1970, dismissing the "myth" that a woman's place is in the home. "But it's very complex and not for everybody. The point is that the dimensions of the house should not define a woman's place. A woman's place is where she is needed." In 1986 she observed: "We were born women; we would be fools to be against ourselves."

Today, asked whether she considers herself a feminist, Dr. Mimms' puts it this way: "I'm a black woman. I'm never a feminist. I'm a woman. I don't have to declare another piece of language. I'm a woman, so I'm a womanist. Feminist is assumed under my existence."

MIMMS RETURNED to the Pacific Northwest in 1972 when she joined the faculty at The Evergreen State College. She remembers the educational climate like this:

The State of Washington wanted a new school, but it wanted a site-based satellite of the University of Washington. And at that time you certainly were not going to be able to do the traditional departments—the traditional academic disciplines. ... A lot of people don't understand one of the reasons it's such a *great* school is that it was able...to look at social justice as a part of the curriculum, no matter what discipline. And it gave an expansive image to the way you can change problem solving. So you had art teachers in the physics department, or you had physics people in the sociology. You're trained in education to be separate. That's why you have departments,

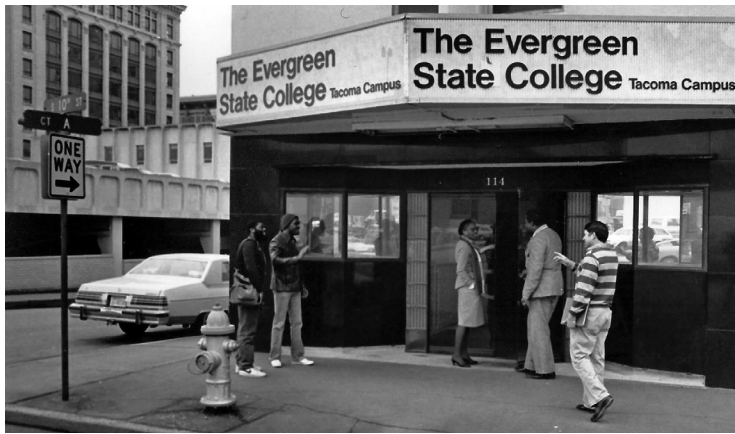
and you have a whole language of those departments. So you're not able to talk other than at some cocktail party and pretend that you are interested in that person's project. Evergreen stopped all of that. We had to talk—not because of, *in spite of*. And you had to begin to learn as grownups how to model collaboration



The Evergreen's Native American Studies faculty in the late 1970s. Seated left, Mary Hillaire, Steven and Betsy Diffendal, Russ Fox. Standing left, Lovern King, David Whitener and Mimms.
TESC

and not competition. And that's why Evergreen is suffering now because we're back in the world of competition, and "How will we win?" And the aggression is *huge*. Students of color are beginning to be caught up in "it's better to win and be competitive rather than be collaborative with shared dialogue and move social justice and liberation along." It's a challenging time in the world right now. It's a good time to be alive.

By 1983, Evergreen Tacoma was seeking formal status. It boasted 150 graduates with bachelor's degrees from its informal campus. *The Olympian's* Virginia Painter came to check



The Evergreen Tacoma campus moved out of Mimms' home and into a few different sites before it's permanent location on 6th Avenue. TESC

out what was happening. She wrote: "Black students form the majority of the program, although others participate, too. Unlike some other programs that focus on the black experience, this program is pitched almost entirely toward traditional liberal arts, experience in all the academic disciplines. They work on scientific and political

analysis, and learn how government works by attending local public meetings and assessing the decisions and their implications."

Dr. Mimms' philosophy has remained steady throughout: "If we could just understand we are all different, but we are all geniuses. The need to recognize that within our own community there are people who think like Plato, paint like Picasso and meditate like Buddha."

She invited her friend Odetta, the famed singer, to teach at The Evergreen State College in Olympia in 1989. Described by MLK as "The Queen of American folk music," Odetta taught "Bridging the Gap Between Art and Living."

Evergreen's Tacoma campus has awarded 2,706 degrees since its inception, a number Mimms had never heard until a historian for the Office of the Secretary of State mentioned it. She paused to savor the statistic. "Almost 3,000 and I have lived to see it!" she declared with a grin. "I never asked for a number because I never wanted to know. You must remember what white people do with statistics. They use it as data, and then they



It was through Odetta that Mimms met Maya Angelou, who became a sister friend.
Maxine Mimms collection

can be against something else. I can start competing with this entity and that institute and lose sight of where I am. When you start working with data you can begin thinking data and statistics are evidence versus the content of the human character."

The Tacoma campus' motto remains: **"Enter to Learn, Depart to Serve"**

Graduates come from all walks of life. Take Anthony Norman, who is 44 and owns a construction business. He just graduated and hopes to earn a Ph.D. in public policy and development starting in the fall of 2018 at Tuskegee University in Alabama, a historically black university that has forged a relationship with Evergreen Tacoma. "The subject matter here... put me on a path so that I could observe that the things that happened in my life, to myself, to my family, were more than just a series of unfortunate circumstances," Norman says. He mentions

that he, his father and his brother have been gunshot victims. His studies made him more aware of structural patterns of inequity. "When you can look at the intricacies of things, you can try and see closer to the root of the problem. Rather than just cutting down a blackberry bush that keeps growing, you can actually dig down there and get the root out."

A 2013 graduate, Monica Alexander, has become the first and so far only African



Dr. Mimms engages students in discussion. *TESC*

American female to be promoted to the rank of captain with the Washington State Patrol. “My Evergreen Tacoma experience was exceptional. I felt like I attended class with family. We argued passionately, cried collectively and supported each other whole-heartedly. We encouraged each other and respected each other’s goals and aspirations.”

In 2018, the average age of Evergreen Tacoma students was 38. According to a 2015 report, “91 percent were employed or in graduate school or a professional program one year after graduating. Of those, 18 percent were both employed *and* in graduate school or a professional program.”

Though working adults, they are still required to attend school full time. “I don’t like part time,” says Dr. Mimms. “I don’t encourage it. I’m from the generation where I like to stretch myself—stretch cognitively as well as physically. When we reduce our philosophy to part time, we produce a bunch of lazy people.”

In order to avoid competing with local community colleges, Evergreen Tacoma offers only upper-division courses. A Pierce County student can attend community college for the first two years then enroll at Evergreen Tacoma. Tacoma Community College even has a “bridge program” in conjunction with Evergreen Tacoma.

Dr. Mimms retired as director in 1990, marking 18 years at The Evergreen State College.

SHE HAD AN AWAKENING in her mid-70s when she traveled to Kenya for two weeks on a Cultural Reconnection mission. She went back six more times. Dr. Mimms had been to Africa as a tourist, but this trip was designed to immerse her in Kenyan culture. “It wasn’t a trip. It was an experience. It changed my life,” she says emphatically.

The mission’s goal is to forge friendships through deep conversation with Kenyan col-



The Evergreen Tacoma campus graduates gather around Dr. Mimms in Olympia in the early 1990s. *The Evergreen State College*



Mimms talks about her experience in the civil rights movement at a Martin Luther King Jr. Day event at Joint Base Lewis–McChord in 2013. *Spc. Nathan Goodall photo, JBLM*

leagues. The African American participants encounter "a piece of their ancestral homeland" and come away with "stronger sense of self." The Cultural Reconnection's founder, Dr. Marcia Tate Arunga, is a Seattle native. She described a story from the first mission when African Americans tried to explain to the Kenyan elders the significance of their journey. They related how African Americans from many parts of Africa were captured, taken to the coast and shipped away, leaving few if any record of their lineage. Listening to this story one of the elders lit up with an epiphany. "Oh, you are the Stolen Ones," she said simply. Dr. Arunga went on to explain:

This elder had been taught, throughout her life, to include prayers for the "stolen ones" when she prayed for her ancestors. The Stolen Ones were children who had gone to a village market and never returned. Legend had it that one day a traveler revealed how, when he was on the coast, he had seen hordes of children being boarded onto boats. He suggested to the villagers that their lost children might still be alive. The elder shared that she had never fully understood the significance of the Stolen Ones. Now she did. The descendants of the Stolen Ones were sitting before her. These women were her family.

Watching the elders in Africa impacted Dr. Mimms' own ideas around aging. "In Kenya, elders are not accommodated when they board a bus or walk long distances. Yet they don't complain. In fact, many live with joy." She says elders are "inconveniently independent," suggesting that this might be a better model for aging here as well.

There's a skit Dr. Mimms performs from her recliner in the living room of her Mason County home. She explains how people who get to be a certain age develop a routine. They wake up, shuffle over to the recliner with a cup of coffee, kick back and turn on the

news. Then they get frustrated, and decide it's time to eat. So up goes the recliner handle. They might get dressed or stay in a terry cloth robe, then shuffle back over, pull that handle again and fall back into the seat. The TV remote control is always close, as is a blanket. She points to her own blanket, explaining old people get cold. So they're watching TV and they start to get a little sleepy. They shut their eyes. Suddenly they feel a breeze, unfold the blanket and pull it over their lap. Before long, they're napping again.

Dr. Mimms pulls her blanket over her lap and shuts her eyes. Then she springs up to explain how they wake up a little while later. And before you know it the



Always the educator, Dr. Mimms speaks at The Evergreen State College in 2016. TESC

day is done and they have had very little contact with the outside world.

When Dr. Mimms retired she noticed that when she talked with friends, the conversations inevitably descended into complaining about aches, pains and ailments. She concluded her terry cloth robe was too comfortable, so she burned it. In other words, she has rules for herself that keep her spry at 90. She reads four books a week and doesn't care what they're about. It's the reading that matters. People of her generation took baths instead of showers. She believes Epsom salts and baking soda have kept arthritis away.

She gets dressed each day in her beautifully elaborate African-inspired wardrobe, accessorized with an array of fascinating rings and jewelry, mostly fashioned from stones and shells. And she only visits the doctor once a year, around her birthday.

She takes her role as the village elder very seriously. She doesn't email or own a smartphone but she always has her telephone nearby, poised to counsel and console.

"SHE'S A MENTOR, not a mother," says Dawn Mason, a former Washington State Representative for the 37th District, who



Dr. Mimms talks with The Evergreen's Upward Bound participants, a precollege program that aims to "support low income high school students in becoming the first in their family to obtain a college degree." *TESC*

considers herself a protégé. African Americans of all ages—girls and young women in particular—arrive at her home to absorb her wisdom. Maxine Mimms isn't baking pies; she's fostering knowledge and an understanding of their history and their culture. She gets a kick out of watching children from the city search for shells on her beach, learning there is nothing to fear in an unfamiliar environment. She wants her oral history transcript to survive in the Washington State Archives so that history remembers the old black lady who lived in the woods and "wasn't afraid of no bears."

When Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, Dr. Mimms was at Dawn Mason's house celebrating. "You young ones, you think this is natural," the octogenarian said. "But to see old white men in red ties saying, 'I pass on a legacy to a 46-year-old black man,' it's unbelievable to me. He is talking about being President of the United States. It just blows me away."

Peering through the lens of an educator, she views Obama's successor as a rich little boy whose parents, the educational system and the electorate failed him—and America:

[W]hen this little boy was standing in the corner, and [other] children threw a ball at him, he picked it up and threw it over the fence. And they brought him into the principal's office and said, "Donald, that's not nice!" And Donald's daddy came down and bailed him out. You never hear Donald Trump talking about his mother. He's afraid of his daddy. Finally Donald got in trouble, so they sent him to boarding school to not be a "punk"—to be a man. He is angry. And now Donald Trump, 71 years old, whatever he is, says to America, "I am so lonely, I am still playing with toy soldiers." He's got generals around him. Eisenhower warned us about "the military-industrial complex," and we're in it. We're in a coup. And when [Trump] said, "I want to see a parade on Pennsylvania Avenue!" I cried. But it is not Donald Trump. It's us. We allowed it. We cleared a pathway for him.

In her retirement years, if you can call them that, Dr. Mimms has spearheaded the Maxine Mimms Academy, which provides a classroom for students who have been suspended or expelled from Tacoma schools. The academy offers mentoring to get students back into the public school system and teaches them how to succeed by channeling anger, frustration and intellectual lethargy. Other programs are offered, too, including horticulture and job training.

She also founded "Let the Strings Speak," a nonprofit that describes itself as a collaboration "of the music from the Pan African Culture that sustains and feeds your soul. ...As educators, we believe that the sounds from the string instruments reduce the noise level in our development, and learning raises the energy and allows us to reach for excellence."

Dr. Mimms' message for educators today is this: "Have joy in the design to make people continue with hope." She believes the future of education is in field trips and getting children out of the classroom, interacting with one another.

The Living Arts & Cultural Heritage Center in Bremerton was



Mimms with visitors in her Mason County home in 2018.

created out of this vision—yet another great idea hatched in her living room. “We’ve been sitting here for years with the celebration of hidden history and all the ancestral stuff,” says Karen Vargas, the co-director of the center. “We’ve got an underground in our building. And we’ve got a rooftop. It’s for all of us—all our history; all our culture; all our life stories; *who we are*. We’ve got sacred space.”

In 2017 the center opened in a temporary location. The capital campaign is working to secure a permanent building being designed by Johnpaul Jones, the Northwest architect and artist who created the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. Dr. Mimms plans to donate some of her personal collection to the center. It will include The Maxine Mimms Visioning Room.

There has been talk about renaming Evergreen Tacoma in honor of Dr. Mimms. She is reluctant, saying she doesn’t need the recognition. Her legacy is carried on by keeping the campus funded. She’s nervous that adding her name would dilute the mission. “This is in our hearts,” she said. “A building could go and close up forever, but a Tacoma campus will always be here. No one will ever take it away. And even when I die I’m coming back to make sure of it.”

Dr. Mimms’ has made some influential friends in her lifetime, including Dr. Maya Angelou and Oprah Winfrey, who sent 90 white hydrangeas from her personal garden to celebrate Dr. Mimms’ birthday. Angelou’s grandson, Elliott, officiated the festivities, which attracted a diverse crowd of admirers of all colors, creeds and persuasions. There were dashikis and kilts, flowing robes and T-shirts.

Maxine Mimms and Maya Angelou were born only one month apart. At Evergreen in 2007, Angelou summed it all up in the rich cadences of her unique voice:

Dr. Mimms is a sister friend of mine, and she invited me here all those years ago. She had been a professor and she realized that there was an Evergreen Olympia. But there was not a place for poor black men and women over 18, and poor Native American, and poor white, and poor Latino, men and women to visit, to go to school. She began to harass the state, and this black woman began Evergreen ... the Tacoma branch was begun in her kitchen. ... So many people came—blacks and whites, Spanish-speaking and Native American.



From left, Dr. Ruth Kelly-McIntyre, Maya Angelou, Oprah Winfrey and Dr. Maxine Mimms celebrate Angelou’s birthday. *Maxine Mimms collection*

She broke the wall between the kitchen and the dining room. I know that Maxine Mimms is a rainbow in the clouds.

Stevie Wonder's joyous "Happy Birthday to ya!" echoed around the jam-packed room at Evergreen Tacoma at her 90th birthday party. Dr. Mimms was dancing in the middle of a giant circle that formed around her. "Let me tell you about the hat," she said. It featured



Mayor Victoria Woodards presents her very first key to the City of Tacoma to Dr. Maxine Mimms at her 90th birthday party. *Flyright Productions, LLC photo*

cowrie shells as a sign that slavery no longer has currency. "So the hat told me, 'You can get up and move!' Them cowrie shells were talking to me. I got up. And then I threw the cane! But then I walked back and got it."

Tacoma's new mayor, Victoria Woodards, a proud African American, presented Dr. Mimms the key to the city. Governor Jay Inslee's proclamation called her a shared treasure. And Larry Gossett, the King County councilman who was in the trenches of the Black Power movement 50 years ago said it takes only four words to sum up Dr. Maxine Mimms:

"She is the light!"

Lori Larson
Legacy Washington
Office of the Secretary of State

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1968: The Year That Rocked Washington looks back at 1968 and its impact on Washington state through the stories of some remarkable people who lived through it. On college campuses, the campaign trail and evergreen peaks, Washingtonians were spurred to action. It was the year when Vietnam, civil rights, women's liberation and conservation coalesced—the year when tragedy led the 6 o'clock news with numbing regularity. 1968 changed us in ways still rippling through our society a half century later. *1968: The Year That Rocked Washington* features a collection of online stories and an exhibit at the Washington State Capitol in the fall of 2018. Legacy Washington documents the activism and aftershocks of a landmark year in world history. www.sos.wa.gov/legacy/sixty-eight/